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ABSTRACT

Students sometimes respond to writing assignments automatically, almost as if they were a generic form, rather than by investigating the idiosyncrasies and unexpected possibilities of each assignment. Writing assignments can be structured to help students transcend such habits, shifting the focus from accumulating information to creating meaning at deeper levels of their own awareness. Drawing from the fields of composition and poetry, this paper focuses on the element of surprise as a means of fostering personal connectedness with subject matter. It offers suggestions for introducing surprise into the logistics of writing assignments as well as consideration of the mechanics of expanding awareness upon which such possibilities are based. Research on educational technologies for reliable, holistic development of consciousness is also cited. (Contains three notes and 26 references.) (Author/NKA)

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WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AS WINDOWS, NOT WALLS: ENLIVENING UNBOUNDEDNESS THROUGH BOUNDARIES

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ABSTRACT: Students sometimes respond to writing assignments automatically, almost as if they were a generic form, rather than by investigating the idiosyncrasies and unexpected possibilities of each. Writing assignments can be structured to help students transcend such habits, shifting the focus from accumulating information to creating meaning at deeper levels of their own awareness. Drawing from fields of composition and poetry, this paper focuses on the element of surprise as a means of fostering personal connectedness with subject matter. It offers concrete suggestions for introducing surprise into the logistics of writing assignments as well as consideration of the mechanics of expanding awareness upon which such possibilities are based. Research on educational technologies for reliable, holistic development of consciousness is also cited.

In their text for teachers of writing **Beat Not the Poor Desk**, Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen formulate what they call the first law of survival: "give no assignment which evokes, for...close reading, set after set of tedious papers" (32). This advice applies equally well in other disciplines, and most of us have learned by experience that students who feel personally connected to academic subject matter usually write better about it. For our own sakes as well as for our students, therefore, we try to develop assignments that are "interesting." While individual preferences and generational relevance are certainly important, I would like to suggest that the potential for connectedness may have more to do with an assignment's ability to transcend its own specifications than with the particulars it offer.

Personal connections emerge, I suggest, when students are able to use the objective boundaries of a topic, whether self-selected or assigned, as a way to experience and enliven their own subjectivity. Writing assignments that entice students to go more and more deeply into their **own** understanding of the subject matter -- no matter how limited it may be -- provide windows through which students may glimpse questions and contradictions that demand their attention. To encourage a focus shift from external accumulation of information to internal experience of making meaning, I suggest that our writing assignments may need to become (at least for awhile) almost transparent. This paper is intended to offer food-for-thought on a variety of levels, from concrete ideas about structuring writing assignments to consideration of the underlying

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mechanics of consciousness upon which such practicalities are based. (1)

Although empirical research seems to find little significant correlation between topic characteristics and writing performance (Hoetker and Brossell), most teachers continue to believe that assignment structure does make a difference. (See Coles and Vopat for interesting examples.) At one end of the specificity continuum, we may favor rich contextual prompts believing that, with sufficient role playing, students will enter into the spirit of the writing situations and somehow make them their own. At the other end of the continuum, we may beg the question entirely and have students select their own topics. In addition, of course, we may locate, and re-locate, our writing assignments anywhere in between.

It is my observation that students who already know what it feels like to personally connect with subject matter are generally able to do so, irrespective of the form the assignment takes, given enough time. Students who are not so familiar with the inner experience of connectedness, however, tend to look outward at the assignment to provide "the answers." Context-rich assignments can be especially seductive because they may appear to do just that. When students "follow the directions" in such an assignment and still something eludes them, they think they must have "misunderstood the assignment." (How many times have you heard this phrase?) Doubting their own perceptions sends students even further in an outward direction -- perhaps asking the teacher to explain, for example, "specifically what you want me to do." What we want them to do is to connect with objective subject matter on a subjective level and see where it takes them. But the nature of subjective experience precludes (and I would add, fortunately) telling them just how to go about this or what the results might be.

Self-selected writing topics may seem to work better, at least for awhile, as students surprise themselves -- and their teachers -- with an initial sense of empowerment and enthusiasm. But such useful catalysts often fade as students are expected to move from writer-based to reader-based drafts. The novelty of ownership may quickly wear off and heavy responsibility take its place if the first sprouts of connectedness are not rooted deeply enough in the students' awareness to withstand the winds of revision.

As teachers, we may simply conclude -- I think, rightly -- that different writing assignments succeed at different times with different students. We may also conclude that success relies as much on what students are able to bring to the assignments as on the assignments themselves, which is probably also true. The questions, then, becomes: How can we help students bring more? I consider this to be one of the central purposes of writing assignments (at least in the composition class), and yet it is something that most do not directly address. How can we structure writing assignments such that their boundaries can help students develop personal connections with the world around them?

From this point on, I would like to focus on a particular means of fostering

connectedness in writing assignments: the element of surprise. At the university level, the field of composition has not given surprise as much respect as I think it deserves. There are exceptions, of course. One notable advocate is Donald Murray -- Professor Emeritus of English at the University of New Hampshire, prolific writer, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize. Murray takes his own writing experiences as subject matter in many of his books and articles, offering observations and insights about the power of the unexpected as well as teaching methods to foster surprise. John Bean and John Ramage also give surprisingly comprehensive treatment in their classroom text **Form and Surprise in Composition: Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum**. And there are others, such as Peter Elbow who will be discussed later. For the most part, however, when surprise is mentioned in conjunction with writing assignments, I think we are more likely being advised to "clarify" it out than to build in opportunities for the unexpected to grow.

Looking to explore the relationship between surprise and connectedness, I turned from the field of composition to the field of poetry where I found Percy Bysshe Shelley's explanation of how "[p]oetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts" (189). I read Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition of the poet as one "who reattaches things to Nature and to the Whole -- re-attaching even artificial things and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight" (258). I also found many statements similar to Sandra McPherson's description of her own writing process: "I have to feel almost lost at the beginning, and ignorant -- but full of curiosity" (292).

Before the surprises of connectedness can be experienced by readers of poetry, curious poets must themselves come upon the unexpected. Robert Frost explained that, for him, "the initial delight of a poem is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew" (qtd. inreaders **Write** 22). William Stafford advised that "[y]ou've got to step off the path if you're going to explore new places" (80). And Mark Strand suggests that "[t]he degree to which a poem is resolved before I set it on paper is the degree to which its chances of ever getting on paper are diminished" (317). Poets cultivate what John Keats called Negative Capability: the ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (qtd. in Norman 17). Teachers of aspiring poets try to culture the same, using preliminary exercises with students just to get the language rolling. Lots of nonmemorable words do get generated this way. But when student poets come up with a sparkling image or line, they -- and their teachers -- appreciate it as a gift from the imagination.

Poet Ira Sadoff, in his article **Transformation and Surprise: The Restoration of Imagination**, says that imaginative poems respect the need for dialectical tension between what he calls structural intelligence or transformation and associative wildness

or surprise. In such poems, he says, "knowledge and feeling...do not merely accumulate: they resonate backward and forward, so that comprehension and pleasure is [sic] always narratively compressed, retrospective, and incomplete" (44). Sadoff bemoans much of today's poetry, explaining that the emphasis on clarity fails because it "refuses the pleasures of texture, of working with the difficult and unknown" (50). The result is poems that lack imagination, he says, poems that are "competent, unadventurous, and dull" (43).

Competent, unadventurous, and dull.....set after set of tedious papers. Certainly, in the field of composition, we do not want to foreground imagination over clarity or strive for meaning that is compressed, retrospective, or incomplete. But must we throw out the baby with the bath water? I suggest that we can systematically encourage our students to surprise themselves as they write and help them build upon what they discover.

Traditionally, tedious papers are blamed on tedious topics. Again, we can turn to poetry for illumination. In a compilation of articles, editors of top literary journals discussed the poems they accept for publication. Maura High, of the **New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly**, noted that "poets tend to return, again and again, to a few familiar subjects" (55). The challenge, she says, is to handle the subject in such a way that the reader feels it is "something quite new, never before seen so clearly, or in this light" (55).

In his essay "Dull Subjects," poet William Matthews likens subject matter to a "chunk of matter with process already alive in it," something chosen specifically "in order that it be transformed" (143). He says, "It is not...the subject that is or isn't dull, but the quality of attention we do or do not pay to it, and the strength of our will to transform." (152) Matthews' ideas apply equally well to the student of composition as to the poet. In either case, the written product is an expression of the quality of attention of the writer. If, through the process of writing, the writer transcends to more expanded levels of awareness, where attention is more powerful, even familiar subject matter can be experienced in a new light. We say, then, that the writer has "connected" with his or her material, implying that something has been created to link the two. But in actuality, connection is more an experience of transformation. As the boundaries of the self expand to incorporate what was previously seen as the nonself, i.e. subject matter, what seemed to be a gap between the self and the nonself starts to dissolve.

When writers transcend previous levels of understanding, their awareness functions -- at least momentarily -- beyond accustomed boundaries. Every time this happens, no matter how many times it has happened before, writers are surprised. They go from something familiar -- something they can think or feel or perceive -- to something they could not have previously even imagined. This is why even familiar subject matter, when considered from increasingly more unbounded levels of awareness, always feels new. In the process of connecting with subject matter, writers are actually transforming

themselves. And the writing they produce from more expanded levels of awareness also offers its readers an opportunity to reconnect with deeper levels of their own awareness and create new knowledge for themselves. Critic J. Hillis Miller has spoken movingly of the delight of reading such works. He says:

> For me, the joy of reading, when it comes, is something like [William] Wordsworth's sudden joy: surprising, unpredictable both in its nature and possible effects, a break in time,...a dissolution of pre-existing orders, the opening of a sense of freedom that is like a new earth and a new heaven, an influx of power (2).

Donald Gravés, internationally known for his research on the teaching and learning of writing, speaks of coming to trust what he calls the shadows of thought, and I suggest that this is where the real power of writing assignments may lie. If students are to transcend what they already know as they write (and as they read), they must come to trust their ability to, sometimes, feel their way along. In an article in **The Reading Teacher**, Graves described his own straight-forward working method, which has brought him considerable success. "I state my objects," Graves says, "lay out the procedures, and plunge ahead to completion" (18). But Graves also recognizes the hazards of his approach. "High activity and determined purpose," he says, "...tend to make me look for preconceived answers to my questions. I'm beginning to slow down and keep the solutions to my problems open longer" (18- 19).

To encourage students to keep the solutions to their problems open longer, writing assignments need to be able to surprise students out of the sense of familiarity and habit that fosters complacency -- to remind students that knowledge is structured in consciousness, not subject matter. Peter Elbow is heading in this direction with his metaphor prompts described in **Writing With Power**. "Imagine the concept of honesty as a place," he says. "Describe it" (92). Or, "If this object could speak, what would it tell you about yourself that you weren't aware of?" (89). The idea is not that students take such comparisons as goals, but that in being asked to think in new ways, creativity (and I would add the ability to connection with subject matter) is stimulated. As Elbow explains, such force-fit metaphors should "violate your accustomed way of thinking about your topic" (79). He also suggests other methods, like looping, ways of "letting goals, meanings, and end-products slip partly out of mind in order to allow for restructurings of your mind and new points of view that would be impossible if you kept your eye on the goal all the time" (75). In other words, Elbow is trying to encourage surprise.

I was inspired to try a variation with a basic writing class that was intimated, generally, by assignments. The assignment had become the Goal (capital G), and like the experience related by Donald Graves, just having one tended to make students look for preconceived answers, using preconceived methods of response. I wanted an

assignment that would surprise students out of this position, without substituting another idol in its place. So, we didn't start out with "an assignment" at all. One day, during a lull in class discussion of Eudora Welty's **One Writer's Beginnings**, I asked students to take out pen and paper, saying we were going to do something different. After I read a short section from the text, I asked students to extend Welty's point with experience/impressions of their own.

They were to write quickly ("without thinking"), starting with any part of her ideas that they wanted. After five or ten minutes, I asked the students to stop writing; read their sketches quickly to themselves; and do a short, specific exercise with them. (Types of exercises depend on the material students are working with. Exercises can be as simple a circling one of their images that seems especially vivid or underlining something they want to know more about. Exercises can also be more sophisticated, for example, choosing a quality of human nature touched upon in their sketch and starting to define it or explaining a personal experience they wrote about from another person's point of view.) Perhaps because this project unfolded more like a treasure hunt than a writing assignment, students readily entered into its spirit, willing (and seemingly able) to feel their way along. They were not thinking ahead, trying to "understand" what they were "supposed" to do, because there was no assignment. Instead, they seemed to become more intrigued by what I didn't say than by what I did, which was the foundation I wanted to establish and build on. Students began to expect the unexpected.

There can be as many specific exercises as seem useful with each sketch. Usually, I use just one or two, then read another short text selectionsketch. Usually, I use just one or two, then read another short text selection, and we move on to write again. Writing quickly, with abrupt changes in direction, students come to realize that they are not (yet) after any particular goal. They are simply finding different things to say and different ways to say them. After a few twists and turns, useful surprises do come. With lively glimpses of their own ideas, observations, and questions already in hand, students then seem ready to slow down and give some of them sustained attention. Starting this way, students get a sense of what it feels like to be connected with their own ideas, without pressure to produce a particular end result, and they naturally want to examine their ideas (and those of their p

After we do several sketches (each with exercises), I hand out the assignment, which is often quite simple, an expression of processes of learning that are already underway. Obviously, sketch prompts and exercises need to be selected carefully, so that each step builds upon previous ones -- usually in a slightly different way for each student. Although prompts and exercises point students in many possible directions, all need to result in potentially appropriate prewriting for the particular assignment to come. Initially, I used this method with expressive assignments early in the course term. I have also found that, with a little modification, it works well as a lead-in to more traditional

academic material, helping students to experience and convey lively, personal connections with objective subject matter -- without necessarily having to resort to first person narrative or opinion.

In addition, the technique also works when students write on their own, outside of class. For the delivery of sequenced and timed prompts, I give each student several folded-over, stapled sheets of paper, numbered in the order they are to be opened. Each sheet gives an instruction, similar to one of those I have already explained, and includes a time limit. Students simply work through the sheets and bring all the material they generate to the next class. Many also come with something else: a spark of interest in an idea they have uncovered. Using this approach, students who are accustomed to straining in order to "psyche-out" the assignment and/or the teacher are liberated from that tendency, and students who typically freeze up when asked to self-select a topic find that they do, in fact, have things to say. Drawn in more and more to the process as they watch their own ideas unfold, students start to take themselves by surprise.

I developed this approach with inexperienced writers, but it has successfully warded off boring papers from students at all skill levels. In an excellent compilation of his essays **Expecting the Unexpected: Teaching Myself and Others to Read and Write**, Donald Murray suggests that tedious writing is a learned response. I agree, and add that some of our "better" students may have learned what they think are the "rules" of responding to assignments so well that they are almost incapable of surprising themselves, or their readers, very much. Others, insecure about their writing abilities and afraid that such "rules" really do exist, are looking for them very very carefully, afraid of taking any step, even temporarily, into the unknown. Unless students are willing to venture into uncharted waters, to go beyond their previous levels of understanding, they are left simply to gather external subject matter along the shore (so to speak), brush it off, and find yet another way to display it. Hardly the makings of real knowledge.

Although Western systems of education tend to focus primarily on subject matter, or what is to be known, knowledge also includes the process of knowing and the knower. Academic disciplines, to a greater or lesser extent, emphasize process of knowing. But development of the knower, the student's individual awareness, is usually thought to be beyond their purview. In the field of composition, more and more consideration is being given to the nature of student writers themselves, not only to investigate cognitive processes but also the vast areas of learning that occur beyond the cognitive domain (for example, see Brand and Graves). Such pioneering work brings needed attention to the importance of intuition, imagination, etc. in the writing process. But in terms of offering means to develop the writer's inner awareness, the source of all ways of knowing, conclusions tend to be localized and tentative.

There is research, however, indicating that reliable technologies for expansion of

consciousness do exist. During the past 25 years, more than 500 scientific studies have been conducted by universities and research institutions worldwide on the educational programs made available by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (see Orme-Johnson for citations). The most well known of these is the Transcendental Meditation (TM) program, a simple, mental technique to systematically expand awareness, and benefits have been documented for people of all ages, cultures, and walks of life. (2) Applications in the field of higher education indicate that meditating students show higher levels of general academic knowledge and skills, as well as greater self-actualization and increased moral reasoning abilities (Jones, 155: see also Cranson et al.; Dow; Ferguson; and So).

At my university, for example, as part of the daily routine, all students and faculty -- in addition to focusing on physics or business or literature or computer science -- practice Transcendental Meditation, morning and evening. (3) This is something quite different from various exercises -- sometimes eclectically termed "meditation" -- that may be devised by educators trying to stimulate creativity in their classes. The benefits of the TM program are not only reliable and verifiable, but they are also holistic. As individuals grow in higher states of consciousness, benefits have been documented in all spheres of life -- physiological, psychological, sociological, and ecological. Of course, taking action in order to develop higher consciousness is a personal matter. But my experiences a writer and as a teacher of writers lead me to suggest that this educational technology deserves wider application.

In addition to the possibility of offering students a reliable means to develop awareness from the "inside out" as part of the educational process, we can also continue to encourage students to expand boundaries from the "outside in" through our discipline curricula. Poet and fiction writer James Dickey has said that "poetry makes possible the deepest kind of personal possession of the world" (1). I suggest that our writing assignments can also move in this direction, acting as stimuli for personal connectedness with subject matter, encouraging the unexpected to occur. We cannot, however, legislate surprise or create it for someone else. It is the personal transformation of awareness that sends writers back to their desks, day after day. Writing, like development of consciousness, is very much an inside experience.

NOTES

1. My discussions of consciousness in this paper derive from knowledge of Maharishi's Vedic Science. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, working with modern scientists and Vedic scholars over the past 30 years, has brought to light knowledge of consciousness from the Vedic tradition of ancient India and made it accessible to the contemporary mind as Maharishi's Vedic Science. In so doing, he has also made available practical educational technologies, the benefits of which have been verified in more than 500 scientific studies conducted at universities and research institutions worldwide (see Orme- Johnson for citations).

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